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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000290

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02-23-14

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SUBJECT: Muslim MPs cross aisle to President's party;
key Muslim leader throws support to PM's party

Refs: Colombo 266, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: On February 22, four Muslim MPs who had been aligned with the PM's party signed an agreement stating they would now support the President's party in the upcoming elections. In reaction to that move, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress has moved to support the Prime Minister's party. Muslim political support is now fairly evenly divided between the parties of the President and Prime Minister. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) On February 22, four MPs crossed over from the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) and signed an agreement to support the President's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) in the upcoming April 2 parliamentary election. (The 12 MPS of the SLMC had been part of the PM's United National Front "UNF" coalition in the previous government.) Three of the four MPs who switched their support to the UPFA, A.L.M. Authalla, M.M. Harees and M.I.A. Anver, were all from the same eastern district of Ampara. The fourth, M.B.A. Azeez, was a national list MP, also from Ampara District. Authalla and Azeez, part of the so-called "Authalla Group" within the SLMC previously had threatened to side with the President's party at various times over dissatisfaction with Rauf Hakeem's leadership of the SLMC.

3. (C) Specifically citing Hakeem's lack of progress in ensuring security for the Muslim community as the key reason the group had switched sides, M.B.A. Azeez told poloff on February 23 that the group had had "no choice" but to support the President's party. (Note: Sri Lanka's eastern province is an ethnic patchwork, with Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils each constituting one-third of the population. The Muslims in the eastern province have long been subjected to attacks and harassment by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Belam "LTTE.") Azeez said he thought President Kumaratunga would be "much more dedicated to Muslim security" than Hakeem had been, and added that he "had absolutely no doubt" of a nationwide victory for the President's party in the upcoming election. Azeez also felt there was a "great amount of support" for the UPFA among Muslim voters in the north/east.

4. (C) In reaction to this move, the SLMC signed an agreement of its own late on February 22 with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP). The SLMC-UNP agreement, officiated by the two parties' general secretaries, states that the SLMC will support the UNP in several districts, but will run candidates under its own electoral symbol in the north/east. Although Muslim political groups have been divided in the past, Hakeem, in recent weeks, was lobbying for all Muslim candidates to join together and run under a united Muslim banner. Ferial Ashraff, leader of the Muslim party National Unity Alliance (NUA) -- long a supporter of the President -- rejected Hakeem's call for unity on February 18. With the breakaway of the four SLMC MPs from Authalla's group and Hakeem's alliance with the UNP, the idea of a national Muslim party is clearly finished.

5. (C) COMMENT: With the defection of the four SLMC members to support the UPFA, Muslim political support is now closely divided between the parties of the President and Prime Minister. The PM has the support of eight SLMC MPs and the President has seven -- the three NUA MPs plus the four SLMC defectors. Geographically, this move leaves the SLMC strongest in the central and western regions of the country, with lessened support in the east where the majority of the island's Muslim population is concentrated. Although Muslim voters in the eastern province have tended to back the SLMC in the past, with this breakaway SLMC faction added to the NUA's support for the UPFA, Muslim political support is now more likely to be divided. Showing how seriously

the party is taking recent developments, SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem announced February 23 that he would be running from the eastern Ampara District, not his home constituency of Kandy in the center of the country. END COMMENT.

16. (U) Minimize considered.

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